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SUBJECT: STATE ELECTIONS IN CHHATTISGARH AND MADHYA PRADESH: PARTIES
IN PLAY AND REDISTRICTING

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¶1. (U) Summary: In November and December 2008, state elections will be held in six out of 29 Indian states. This round of polling is widely perceived as a "semi-final" before the national elections, which are due before May 2009. In Consulate Mumbai's consular district, Chhattisgarh and Madhya Pradesh have been ruled by Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) governments since the last elections in November 2003. In Chhattisgarh, the Congress Party and the BJP are poised for a straight fight, whereas the field is more crowded in Madhya Pradesh, with several regional parties in addition to the traditional Congress and BJP, crowding the ballot. This is part two in a series of election cables on these states; in septels, we will analyze party platforms and campaign issues that will likely drive electoral outcomes. End summary.

The Basics: BJP Stronghold in Central India

¶2. (U) On October 14, the Election Commission announced polling dates for five states due to hold assembly elections by the end of the year. It subsequently announced dates for a sixth state - Jammu and Kashmir - during the same time period. In Chhattisgarh, which suffers frequent attacks by Naxalite insurgents in its southern districts, election polling will take place over two days -- November 14 and 20 -- to ensure that sufficient security is in place to protect voters and voting locations. In the first phase, 39 assembly districts, including the Naxalite-affected southern districts of Dantewara, and sub-districts of Bijapur and Jagdalpur, go to polls, while 51 assembly districts vote in the second phase. In Madhya Pradesh (MP), polling will take place on November 27. Vote counting will take place on December 8, after elections are complete in five states. According to recent voter registration records, there are 15 million eligible voters in Chhattisgarh, and 35 million in Madhya Pradesh. For the first time in India the voter rolls contain a photo of the voter included along with the name, which would make fraudulent voting difficult.

¶3. (U) The BJP controls both state legislatures, and dominates the parliamentary delegations at the national level. In the November 2003 elections, the BJP won decisive victories against incumbent Congress governments in both the states. In the 230-seat state assembly in MP, the BJP has 173 members and the Congress 38. In the outgoing state assembly of 90 seats in Chhattisgarh, the BJP holds 50 seats, the Congress 37. Both MP and Chhattisgarh have significant scheduled caste (SC/Dalit) and tribal (ST) populations, and large numbers of assembly seats are reserved for these disadvantaged communities. Thirty-nine of Chhattisgarh's 90 seats are reserved for SC/ST candidates SC - 10, ST - 29); in MP, 82 of the 230 seats are reserved for scheduled castes and tribes (SC - 35, ST - 47). With 29 and 11 parliamentary seats respectively, MP and Chhattisgarh account for 40 out of 543 seats in the Indian national parliament. In

the April 2004 national elections, the two states elected BJP majorities. Of the 29 Lok Sabha seats in MP, the BJP won 25; of the 11 seats in Chhattisgarh, 10 seats are held by the BJP.

Urban Voters Gain Electoral Strength

14. (U) These assembly elections will be based on new voter rolls published in early October which reflect the new constituency boundaries drawn up by the delimitation commission. From 2004 to 2007, India underwent a major redrawing of election districts to equalize the representation of each district and better reflect the population migration from rural to urban centers that occurred over the 23 years since constituency boundaries were last redrawn. At the time of the 1971 census, less than 20 percent of Indians lived in urban areas. By the 2001 census, however, this figure had increased to 28 percent as millions of Indians moved from villages to urban areas in search of jobs, changing the relative size of urban and rural constituencies with urban voters underrepresented in state and national legislative bodies. The redistricting exercise corrected this imbalance by redrawing boundaries such that each constituency within a state, whether urban or rural, now has approximately the same population size.

15. (U) The conventional wisdom of political commentators is that the 2008 redistricting benefits the BJP, which tends to poll stronger in urban areas. This effect will likely be muted in the case of Chhattisgarh and MP, however, which are predominantly rural states, with urban concentration levels (Chhattisgarh - 20 percent; MP - 26 percent) that are lower than the national average and certainly lower than those of their neighboring states (Gujarat - 37 percent; Maharashtra - 42).

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Overall, the formation of new constituencies will make election predictions more difficult, as old vote blocks are divided and shifted, and candidates face new combinations of voter groups and untested electorates.

Straight Fight between the BJP and the Congress in Chhattisgarh

16. (U) In Chhattisgarh, the BJP is contesting the election with incumbent Chief Minister Dr. Raman Singh as the chief ministerial candidate. The Congress, on the other hand, will follow its traditional policy of electing a chief minister from victorious assembly members, if it garners a majority. At least six Congress leaders are in the race for the chief minister's post, including former chief minister Ajit Jogi, nine time Congress MP Vidyacharan Shukla, four-time Congress MP Arvind Netam, state Congress president Dhanendra Sahu, working president Charandas Mahant and All India Congress Committee treasurer Motilal Vora. However, according to a Congress source, Renu Jogi, the wife of former chief minister Ajit Jogi, might be chosen as the chief minister so that her husband can move to national level politics.

17. (U) The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) of Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mayawati has declared candidates for 85 out of 90 seats in Chhattisgarh. Media reports indicate that nearly 20 long-time party leaders who founded and worked for the party since the early nineties are in revolt against the current state president Dauram Ratnakar, who is a recent import from the Congress. Party veterans allege that Ratnakar has auctioned off tickets to the highest bidders and is interested in lining his pockets rather than working for long term growth of the party. The revolt by party rank and file could mean that the BSP may not make an electoral dent in Chhattisgarh. The Shiv Sena, the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI-M), which have also announced they will be fielding candidates (57 all together) are unlikely to impact which party ultimately controls the state. End Note.)

18. (SBU) In Madhya Pradesh, the Congress will be challenging an incumbent BJP government under Chief Minister Shivraj Singh Chauhan. Congress has not declared a Chief Minister candidate, but the likely contenders include: Suresh Pachauri, former central minister and current State Congress President; Jamuna Devi, current leader of the opposition and a tribal woman legislator; Ajay Singh, current chair of the state campaign committee and son of long-time Congress stalwart Arjun Singh; and Subhash Yadav, a former deputy chief minister. However, many in political circles believe the front runner to be Union Minister for Commerce and Industry Kamal Nath. Mahendra Prasad, an independent Rajya Sabha member of parliament who maintains close ties to the Congress, told Poloff that there was a firestorm of protest from other Congress Party aspirants for the Chief Minister when Congress leader and former MP chief minister Digvijay Singh proposed Kamal Nath as the chief ministerial candidate under whom the Congress should fight the election. At least two other parties are poised to play a role in this election: the BSP and the Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party (BJSP), a BJP spin-off led by former MP Chief Minister Uma Bharati. With the prospect of at least a four-cornered race in many constituencies, each party will be choosing its candidates carefully, taking into account local demographics, caste combinations, and specific, local issues, rather than national ones.

19. (U) The BSP's electoral strength in MP waxed in the early 1990s, as new caste-based formulations arose, but waned in the late 1990s, as these new groupings broke apart, lost organizational coherence, or were accommodated within the Congress and the BJP. With the resurgence of Mayawati in MP, and an overall rise in the prominence of the party, a BSP revival looks possible in some pockets. State party president Raja Ram Ahirwar told Congenoffs, "In 2003, we polled 7.26 percent votes, and won only two seats. This time we will double our vote share and will win a startling number of seats." Non-BSP interlocutors agreed that the BSP would damage the Congress and the BJP in these elections, but were unsure whether the impact would be state-wide, or limited to MP's northern districts, which border Uttar Pradesh.

110. (U) A BJP leader told Congenoffs that Mayawati has sent in ministers to campaign, held caste conventions, and spread money widely and generously. "Mayawati has one objective. She wants to show that she and her party will matter in the next national

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election, and MP offers her the best chance to do so." A senior representative of the Catholic Church explained that Christians, especially in the Jabalpur region, where they are concentrated and can make a difference in 3-4 constituencies, have decided to strategically vote BSP to protest anti-Christian violence by Hindu groups, and the Congress' perceived indifference to the plight of this tiny religious minority.

111. (U) In September, former BJP Chief Minister Uma Bharati organized the first of several major rallies in the state to promote her party, the Bharatiya Jan Shakti Party (BJSP). Bharati, a fiery female leader who was famously photographed joyously hugging BJP leader Murli Manohar Joshi after the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, led the BJP to an overwhelming victory in the MP elections in November 2003. Within ten months, however, she was unceremoniously removed from the chief ministership by the party due to internal strife within the party. Since then, she has drifted in and out of opposition to the BJP. The September rally signals that she hopes to take on her former party, which has, in any case, shown no desire to have her back. As an Other Backward Caste (OBC), she may be able to tap into lower caste resentment against the BJP in this election, as well as provide a home to other BJP dissidents.

¶12. (U) Political scientist Arwind Maru hoped that the BSP, the BJSP, and a tribal party - the Gondwana Ganatantra Party - could provide a credible alternative to the BJP and the Congress, if they were to unite. However, state Samajwadi Party (SP) leader Kalyan Jain, as well as journalists, agreed that a "third front" was unlikely, especially since all three parties were battling each other for the same vote base in the northern region of MP that borders Uttar Pradesh. Jain said, "It is not possible because Mayawati is looking for disgruntled Congress party candidates, while Uma Bharati is looking for disgruntled BJP candidates. They are going to contest as many seats as they can; any pre-electoral alliance to form a "third front" is not in their interest." (Note: The Samajwadi Party won 7 seats in the 2003 elections and has named 111 candidates for the current MP elections. End Note.) Anil Dave, the BJP's chief strategist for MP concurred. "For the first time, each MP constituency will have at least four strong candidates. The candidates from Mayawati's and Uma Bharati's parties may or may not have the capacity to win, but many of them will have the capacity to turn a winner into a runner-up. In this election, we will need 230 strategies for 230 constituencies."

MP a Bellwether

¶13. (U) Comment: Not only are the state assembly elections in MP and Chhattisgarh important in themselves because they allow the winning party to control important states, but they are also being closely watched as barometers of how the Congress Party and the BJP stack up against one another going into the national elections that will follow shortly. Of the two states in our consulate district facing elections, MP is bigger, more complex, and more likely a precursor for the kinds of contests India is likely to see in 2009, at least in much of north and western India. While the BJP is in a strong position going into elections in both states, neither the Congress nor the BJP are assured of straight-forward majorities on their own steam in Madhya Pradesh. Perceiving this, regional parties like the BSP and the BJSP have a "two-step" strategy to maximize their quest for electoral power, a strategy which has worked for smaller regional parties repeatedly in India; they will fight on their own in each constituency, with the hope of aligning with one of the major parties to form a coalition once the results are in. After the election, with their pivotal, tiny band of legislators, they can drive a hard bargain and set the two major parties against each other. The Congress faces the problem of multiple competing leaders within its ranks in both states who may undercut each other's candidates during the campaign. Furthermore, if the Congress garners more seats than the BJP, but falls short of winning a clear majority, it could find it ideologically unpalatable to ally with Bharati's BJSP or the BSP, with which it is feuding fiercely in New Delhi and Uttar Pradesh. The BJP has more options for forging alliances in MP. In septel, we will discuss the issues and platforms which are likely to drive the campaigns in each state. End Comment.

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